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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Sir David Lindsay's Report of the Sack of Carrickfergus 1513

In *The Historie and Testament of Squyer William Meldrum* written about 1550 the poet, Sir David Lindsay, relates the adventures of his old friend and neighbour, a well known personality in his day, for many years the Sheriff-Depute of Fife, and by inheritance the laird of Binns, an estate in Kinrosshire. The poem is one of the most delightful of verse biographies for its happy mingling of the colours of traditional romance with the factual homeliness of memoir. Every important assertion of fact concerning the hero, except one, has been verified from contemporary chronicle and public record. That one assertion is to be examined here: that he took part in a sack of Carrickfergus in 1513 by the Scots navy on its way to the relief of Louis XII of France, then occupied with the invading army of Henry VIII.

That the fleet sailed down the Irish Sea for France there is no doubt. That it delayed in order to plunder Carrickfergus and its neighbourhood has seemed to Scots historians an inexplicable, even improbable occurrence. They either report Lindsay's statement without discussion, as do Pinkerton and Tytler and Hume Brown,¹ in effect leaving the responsibility for the authenticity of the event with the poet; or express puzzlement, and suggest that some such capricious action may have occurred on the return from France of the diminished fleet in 1514,² as do Abercrombie and Guthrie,³ or roundly dismiss it as "a poetical fiction," as does the great antiquary, David Laing.⁴ Douglas Hamer, the most competent among the modern editors, is willing to accept the story simply because of the Lyon King's veracity in all other respects, though he brings no new light to bear on the

1. John Pinkerton, *The History Of Scotland* (London, 1797), II, 89-90; Patrick Fraser Tytler, *The History Of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1867), II, 28-6; Hume Brown, *The History Of Scotland* (Cambridge, 1900), I, 333.

2. The death of King James hastened the return of the admiral, the Earl of Arran, who witnesses a charter at Edinburgh, July 1514 (*Reg. Mag.*, 19).

3. William Guthrie, *History Of Scotland* (London, 1767), IV, 340-342, Patrick Abercrombie, *The Scots Nation* (Edinburgh, 1715), II, 528.

4. *The Poetical Works Of Sir David Lyndsay* (Edinburgh, 1871), I, 379.

problem.⁵ The Irish writers, with the exception of Samuel McSkimin, the historian of Carrickfergus, ignore the matter; and he is content to insert Pinkerton's notice of the poem in the 'Addenda' to the 'Additions' of his 1832 edition.⁶ It seems peculiarly remiss of Ramsay Colles that his *History of Ulster* ignores even the report of the event.⁷ He might have taken a hint from the intelligent interest of *The Four Masters* in contemporary Scottish affairs.

What does the poet say? At the age of twenty William Meldrum sought adventures:

And aye his honour did avance,
In Ingland first, and syne in France:
And thair his manheid did assaill,
Under the Kingis greit Admirall,
When the greit Navie of Scoltand,
Passit to the sey aganis Ingland.
And as thay passit be Ireland coist,
The Admirall gart land his oist,
And set Craigfergus into fyre,
And saifit nowther barne nor byre.
It was greit pietie for to heir,
Of pepill the bailfull cheir,
And how the land folk wer spuiyleit,
Fair wemen under fute were fuilyeit.
Bot this yong Squyer bauld and wicht
Savit all wemen quhair he micht:
All preistis and freiris he did save.

The women interest Meldrum, and Lindsay, more than the priests. The hero hears screams from behind a garden wall and rescues an unusually attractive young lady who has been stripped of both clothes and jewellery by two of his less romantically minded countrymen. Of course he kills them, and the lady seems to feel that the service calls for a reward, namely herself. Her father, she points out shrewdly, has "Of yeir lie rent a thousand pound." But trumpets sound the recall to the ship, and after accepting a ruby ring—a gift which then often had the significance of betrothal—and explaining that he would like to see France before thinking of settling in Ireland, William goes on board. The navy proceeds to Brittany. With the squire's further adventures we are not concerned. I will only mention that on his return to Scotland he obtained another ruby ring, this time much more peacefully, from Lady Gleneagles, but at a later date paid so dearly for it with wounds

5. *The Works of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount 1490-1555*, vol. 3 (STS, 1934), pp. 189-192.

6. *The History and Antiquities Of The County and Town of Carrickfergus*.

7. Vol. I (London, 1919).

inflicted by a rival that, as Lindsay says, with such personal experience he could have set up as a surgeon when he pleased.

There is nothing improbable in the essential features of Lindsay's lively description, though the rescued lady's claim to be an Irish princess, her wealth, and sudden devotion, probably owe something to the readiness of an old soldier, still a bachelor, not to undervalue himself when he had a poet for listener.

Carrickfergus had for long been the most important haven of Northern Ireland. Its citizens enjoyed a comparative measure of protection from their fellow-countrymen conferred by the ancient castle—in which the Earl of Kildare had recently, in 1503, settled an English garrison—and by the neighbouring castle of Belfast. The map of 1550 even shows castellated mansions, not to mention the friary that was so indebted to William Meldrum. None the less, according to McSkimin it was, for the most part, a village of scattered "clay houses and Cottages," and each of these would have attached to it a "barne or byre" as described by Lindsay.⁸

The damage done by the raiders was probably not so extensive as he indicates. It should be noticed that the poet introduces the trumpet recall to ship in such a way as to imply that the landing was a raid of no more than one or two days' duration at most. In the poetical Testament, on the French model, that Meldrum is represented as making he refers to the lady as "my dayes darling."

Of the two Scots chroniclers subsequent to the poem who might have known something of this episode, assuming it to have occurred, Bishop Leslie, writing at London 1568-70, and Robert Lindsay of Pitcottie, writing 1577-78, only the latter mentions it.⁹ Pitcottie describes it in more detail than does his namesake, yet it is his account more than the poet's that has provoked the scepticism or silence of later historians.

King James, he explains, did not want a hazardous war with England, and promised Henry to stay North of the Tweed, but he also had his commitments to King Louis, whose help he might yet need, according to the politic theory of the "Auld Alliance." So he temporised, hoping that a land engagement might be avoided, and dispatched his new fleet of twenty ships, carrying some 10,000 soldiers, with James Hamilton, the Earl of Arran, as "captane and great admerall"; intending, Pitcottie says, "that thair support suld cause the king of Ingland to returne."

8. For the map and other descriptive details see McSkimin, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

9. John Leslie, *The Historie Of Scotland, Part III* (STS, 1890); Robert Lindsay of Pitcottie, *The Historie and Cronicles of Scotland*, vol. I (STS 1899), pp. 225-273.

The Earl, however, did not obey orders, but landed at Carrickfergus, burning it "with wther willagis"—an additional phrase that might include the settlement around Belfast castle. With the spoil he made for Ayr, where his men "repossit and playit them the space of xl dayis."

Meanwhile the Scots ambassador in France, Bishop Forman, wrote a sharp letter asking why the navy, that men looked every day to see, had not arrived; and Queen Anne sent a "lufe lettir" with an encouraging postscript of 14,000 French crowns. Thus James learned for the first time of his admiral's peculiar behaviour. In great anger he sent his favourite privateer (or pirate), Sir Andrew Wood, to replace Arran in the command; but that "insolent and young" nobleman refused to resign his authority, and set sail forthwith for France, hoping to arrive "in dew time." Great storms, however, prevented this hope, and James, hearing that his fleet had failed of its purpose, was forced to muster his army within twenty days and invade England.

The difficulties of this narrative for the historian are diverse. They are not the accepted facts that Scotland possessed a navy that figured largely in the calculations of England and France, and that Anne de Bretagne penned a conventional appeal to the king's knightly honour. They are rather the supposed time at which the letter, and Forman's complaint which is mentioned along with it, arrived, and Pitscottie's innocent belief that James had built a very expensive navy and collected a very formidable power of artillery without intending war. The letters mentioned came with the French ambassador, De la Motte, in May 1513, two months before the departure of the fleet—when James knew where to find his admiral, at Court.¹⁰ So far was the king from temporising in the way that Pitscottie suggests, that on the day after the fleet sailed, which was the 25th July, Lyon Herald was dispatched to Henry at Terouenne with a series of intentionally unacceptable demands, the expected rejection of which was at once met with a declaration of war.

It is easy to understand how the chronicler's picturesquely disordered narrative of events would tend to discredit the part of it that relates to the unexplained descent on Carrickfergus. Yet the error consists more in the biased and mistaken representation of the events that he notices, than in the events themselves. A scapegoat for the national calamity was wanted. The Protestant and therefore pro-English party of Pitscottie's times wished to represent James as being forced into unnatural war with England by the cunning of France, the greed of Scots bishops and, most conveniently, the wilful incompetence of a

10. *Accounts Of The Lord High Treasurer Of Scotland*, IV, Preface, p. xxxvi.

Hamilton—not a popular name in these later days on account of the Earl's cautious politics and the suspicion he lay under for his nearness in line to the throne.

Ignoring the distortion of history that this wishful thinking produced, we can notice the general correctness of the statement that Arran and his fleet set out for France—though not indeed from Ayr—about the same time that the king gave his orders for the feudal levies to be mustered within twenty days. These orders were issued on the 24th July the day before the fleet was dispatched.¹¹

When would Arran arrive off Carrickfergus? On the analogy of two other voyages round the North of Scotland with France as the destination—that of James V in 1536, and that of the French commander, Villegagnon, who sailed with Queen Mary in 1548—he would arrive ten days at most after sailing, that is, about the 4th of August.¹²

Just as his successors anchored for a few days off the West Coast, and presumably revictualled their ships, so would he. Carrickfergus and Ayr were natural choices for this purpose, and we shall see that there were special reasons for stopping in both cases. Ayr was the principal port on the West of Scotland and as much used in the French trade as Leith. French ships had been landing provisions, for example wine and flour, throughout the last year, and the yards had been busy with James's ship-building.¹³ In 1512 artillery and ammunition waggons had been sent to the king and the Earl at that port.¹⁴ It seems likely then that Pitscottie's story is partially true: Arran did stop there to collect supplies and an addition to his fleet.

The only inconceivable parts of the story are that Sir Andrew came to relieve him of his command, and that he stayed for so long a period as forty days. In times when it was the unquestioned right of the first peer of the realm—a Hamilton or a Howard—to command the navy, Sir Andrew was no more likely to be considered for the post than was Drake in 1588. But Sir Andrew's son was an informant of Pitscottie and the feeling that it ought to have happened may have transformed itself into the claim that the king intended it to happen. He would certainly know something of the fleet's history.

We have no records to determine when Arran must have left Ayr. The only definite piece of information available does not help: Louis

11. *Accounts*, IV, p. 416.

12. For accounts of these voyages see Pinkerton, *op. cit.*, II, 336; Tytler, *op. cit.*, III, 68. In 1536 a Hamilton was again blamed for delaying the voyage.

13. *Accounts*, IV, Preface, p. xlv.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 343-345.

de Rouville was appointed commander of the combined Scottish and French fleets on 17th September.¹⁵ We may think, however, that the report of the English Governor of Berwick, derived from a priest in James's confidence, that the Scots navy was to reach Brest about the same time that the army crossed the Border, allows a plausible calculation.¹⁶ Since the Scots army had been ordered to move south on the 14th and the voyage to Brest required no more than ten days sailing, we should expect the admiral to have left the West coast about the 4th—which happens to be the latest date calculated for his arrival in these waters. It is therefore about this time the sack of Carrickfergus is most likely to have occurred.

So far, however, I have done no more than suggest a reasonable date for the raid, offer an argument why Pitscottie's one essential addition to the poet's narrative is rather confirmatory than otherwise, and suggest one practical motive for a visit to Carrickfergus. But one does not like to advance an alleged need for victuals and a Scots fancy for trying the Irish variety as the sole and sufficient explanation for setting fire to Carrickfergus. It is fortunate that another reason, a political one, can be drawn from both Irish and Scots sources.

The Annals of the Four Masters states that in 1512 a great war broke out between Hugh O'Donnell, whose power was mainly in the North West of Ulster (though he controlled Fermanagh also) and Art, son of Hugh O'Neill, who ruled most of Ulster on the eastern side.¹⁷ In 1513 O'Donnell unsuccessfully besieged Sligo from 1st February to 15th May.¹⁸ The same year, we are told, "O'Donnell went over to Scotland with a small band, at the invitation of the King of Scotland, who had sent letters and messengers to him. On his arrival there, he received great honours and gifts from the King. He remained with him a quarter of a year. After having changed the King's resolution of coming to Ireland, as he intended, O'Donnell arrived at his house, after having encountered great dangers at sea."¹⁹

The Four Masters is said to be meticulous in its chronology, unlike the picturesquely inaccurate Pitscottie. The even more meticulous *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* record no messengers sent to Ireland, as it would certainly have done had this occurred, but notes sums of money paid to messengers from the Irish chieftain in

15. Hamer, *op. cit.*, III, 191.

16. Pinkerton, *op. cit.*, II, 78.

17. Vol. V (Dublin, 1851), p. 1315.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 1321.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 1323.

March,²⁰ and records his arrival at the Scots Court at the beginning of June. He was lodged with the Earl of Argyle, and due note is made of his departure from Edinburgh on 15th July, taking with him a gift of £160, a canon, some culverins, two carts of ammunition, and eight experts in the "undermining of walls."²¹ Evidently he came, and went, with no peaceful intentions.

His intentions are revealed in the league which he made with James and which is duly recorded under the Great Seal. Since no Irish historian notices this, and it adds something to our knowledge of Irish-Scottish relations in these years, I translate it in full.

"Inasmuch as the illustrious lords of Connal aforetime rendered the ancient faiths, homages and services to the kings of Scotland, even as Hugh O'Donnell, present lord of Connal, the king's cousin, personally rendered—giving council and so forth to the kings of Scotland, as lieges and friends both to defend them and to invade their enemies whosoever in the kingdoms of Scotland, Ireland and England—and promised to receive from the king of Scots conferment of lands and possessions held, and to be held, by his heirs and successors, as often as befel; accordingly the king welcomed the said Lord Hugh O'Donnell seeking to live under the king's peace and protection, and giving pledges of fealty, and promised unfailingly to defend him and his heirs even as he defended other lords, barons and potents of his kingdom—furthermore the king promised, so soon as he should be informed by him or his messengers, to dispatch a multitude of his men, ships, sailors, etc., for the avenging of the injury done to him."²² This bond was witnessed on the king's behalf, at Edinburgh, 25th June, by the Earl of Arran.

It is partly explicable in the light of previous Yorkist intrigues of James and his predecessors with the heads of the House of O'Donnell,²³ but the significant clause is, of course, the final one relating to O'Donnell's recent "injury," which I interpret as referring to his wrongs at the hands of O'Neill.

In 1512 he had invited his temporary ally, the Earl of Kildare, to ravage the East coast as far as Belfast and the glens of Antrim.²⁴ In

20. *op. cit.*, p. 406.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 527.

22. *Reg. Mag.*, II, 3856.

23. Agnes Conway, *Henry VII's Relations With Scotland And Ireland 1485-1498* (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 61, 86.

24. Colles, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-9; *The Four Masters*, V, pp. 1319-1327. After taking Belfast Kildare destroyed the castle of Makeon Bisset of the Glynnas, and captured the son of Con O'Neill.

the crisis of 1513 Kildare, as Henry's Lord-Deputy, dared not oblige the suspected O'Donnell, but in the following year when the Scottish menace was removed and O'Donnell's intrigues in that quarter were no longer a consideration, Kildare again devastated Ulster as far as Carrickfergus.

These events and intentions are of course, the significant background to the chief's Scottish visit. As we have seen, in 1513 he had his share of troubles. The Sligo campaign had been a failure. Kildare could not help him. When he returned to Ireland he had to recapture his castle at Dunluce.²⁵

James, on his side, saw in the Irish chief's predicament an opportunity to make a tactical diversion in Ulster that, synchronised with his preparations for the invasion of England, might help to hasten Henry's return from France. A raid on Carrickfergus would, undoubtedly, be among Arran's sailing orders.

The promise relating to the dispatch of a multitude of men, ships and sailors, was therefore to some extent fulfilled. It is interesting to note, however, that the guns which were sent after O'Donnell on 16th July were hurriedly brought back on the 14th August.²⁶ They would be needed in England. The citizens of Carrickfergus had their revenge at Flodden.

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25. *Ibid.*, *The Four Masters*, V, 1325.

26. *Accounts*, IV, p. 527.